

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE		
DATE:	23 MARCH 2023	AGENDA ITEM:	11
TITLE:	RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN - FINAL FOR ADOPTION		
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SERVICE:	PLANNING, TRANSPORT AND PUBLIC PROTECTION	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report is seeking approval from the Committee for the Council to adopt the final version of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Reading, which has been updated following feedback received from the statutory public consultation which was undertaken for 12 weeks between November 2022 and February 2023.

Appendix A - Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2023-33 - Final for Adoption

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the Committee notes the progress outlined in this report and approves the formal adoption by the Council of the final version of the Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2023-33.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The Council has a statutory duty to prepare and keep updated a Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP), under Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. In addition, the Council has duties under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Highways Act 1980 to maintain and keep the Definitive Map and Statement of Public Rights of Way updated, and to ensure

that rights of way in the borough are adequately signposted, maintained and free from obstruction.

- 3.2 The draft RoWIP has been prepared in accordance with the Statutory Guidance for Local Highway Authorities prepared by DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). The key objective of the plan is to encourage more people to choose to walk or cycle for local journeys, which is aligned with the objectives contained in a range of Council strategies and policies including the current Corporate Plan, Local Transport Plan, Air Quality Action Plan, Climate Emergency Strategy and Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- 3.3 Whilst the RoWIP is an important and standalone document within its own right, it will also become a sub-strategy to the Council's new Local Transport Plan (LTP), the Reading Transport Strategy 2036. Whilst the LTP sets the context and overarching vision for future transport provision in Reading, sub-strategies provide more detailed implementation plans for specific topics. It will therefore become part of the suite of LTP sub-strategies which includes the Bus Service Improvement Plan, the Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan and the Sustainable Modes of Travel to School Plan.

4. THE PROPOSAL

- 4.0 The purpose of the RoWIP is to identify improvements for the rights of way network in the borough, to ensure it is kept up-to-date and well maintained, to better integrate it into the overall transport network, to provide a better experience for its users, and to encourage more people to choose to walk or cycle for local journeys.
- 4.1 Public rights of way are rights across land accessible by the public, which allow them to pass along them at any time they choose. In addition to walking, some rights of way are also open to cyclists, horse riders and in rare cases motorists (although there are none open to motorists in Reading). The different types of right of way are set out below:
- Footpaths - for walking, running, mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs.
 - Bridleways - for walking, horse riding, bicycles, mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs.
 - Restricted byways - for any transport without a motor and mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs.
 - Byways open to all traffic - for any kind of transport, including cars (but they're mainly used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders).
- 4.2 The public rights of way network is set out in the Definitive Map and Statement which are held by all local transport authorities. The network in Reading constitutes 41 footpaths, three bridleways and one restricted byway. Some of these are routes connecting people to key destinations, such as the town centre, Reading Station, Green Park and Thames Valley Business Park. They are used by people traveling to work and school, as well as rural-type routes that are used for leisure purposes. Public rights of way are marked with signs or coloured arrows, for example yellow for footpaths, blue for bridleways.

- 4.3 As part of preparing the draft RoWIP an initial consultation was carried out during June and July 2021. This enabled local organisations and residents to have their say on the public rights of way network in Reading, to explain how they use the network, identify any barriers and suggest enhancements to the network. We also asked about their thoughts on using shared paths for walking and cycling, their rating of our RoWIP priorities and about historic rights of way that were not recorded as part of the network.
- 4.4 The Council received over 200 responses as part of this consultation, with this feedback being used to update the draft RoWIP. In addition, audits of all of the rights of way in the borough have been undertaken to help with the development of the plan.
- 4.5 The results of the initial consultation were presented together with the draft RoWIP strategy to the SEPT Committee on 16 November 2022, which approved a 12-week statutory consultation commence on the draft strategy.
- 4.6 The 12 week statutory consultation on the draft RoWIP was undertaken from 23 November 2022 to 19 February 2023. This included a public survey and engagement with statutory consultees, including the following:
- Age UK
 - British Horse Society
 - Canal & River Trust
 - Mid & West Berkshire Local Access Forum (LAF)
 - Ramblers Association
 - Reading Buses
 - Reading Cycle Campaign
 - Thames Valley Police
- 4.7 The consultation was launched on 23 November through a press release, videos and messages on social media and 230 e-mails sent to local stakeholders. A wide range of stakeholders were alerted to the consultation including all statutory consultees, neighbouring Local Authorities, Thames Valley Police, local transport operators, landowner representatives, and a range of Council and local groups representing particular areas of interest.
- 4.8 The responses to the consultation have been analysed and the main themes of feedback are set out within this report. The RoWIP strategy has been updated following the consultation and the final version is provided at **Appendix A**.
- 4.9 The public survey included questions relating to the key sections of the strategy including the overall vision, objectives, themes and the detailed action plans, space left for comments on each question. The Council has received over 163 responses through the consultation (as of 1 February 2023), with key headline feedback as set out below:
- 81.6% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the proposed RoWIP vision and objectives.
 - Between 71.2% - 84.7% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with each of the seven RoWIP key themes.

- The proportion of respondents that strongly agreed or agreed to each theme of the action plan is set out below:
 - Better Information: 71.2%
 - Improve the Condition of the Network: 84.7%
 - Encourage Use of the Network: 71.2%
 - Better Connected Network: 81.6%
 - Used by All: 71.8%
 - A Safer Network: 83.4%
 - Delivering the Plan: 79.8%

4.10 A range of more detailed comments were received as part of the consultation, with a sample set out below:

- More investment is required to improve facilities for cycling and walking in Reading.
- Concerns raised regarding the level of maintenance undertaken on existing public rights of way.
- Resurfacing of key routes is important, particularly for wheelchair users and other disability access.
- Concerns raised with shared paths, for instance previous proposals for the Thames Path being a shared foot path for walking and cycling with its limited width
- Greater prominence should be given to the safety of vulnerable pedestrians such as those elderly, disabled or young children.
- Views expressed against removing gates on public footpaths as that would enable people to cycle faster on these routes.
- Information on network should be provided in hard copy and not all online.
- The rights of way network should grow and adapt to new housing developments in the future.

4.11 In addition to responses received through the public survey, individual responses were received from statutory consultees and neighbouring local authorities. A presentation of the draft strategy was given to the Mid & West Berkshire LAF on 25 January 2023 as part of the consultation and the draft strategy was received positively.

4.12 A summary of the responses received from statutory consultees through the consultation are set out below:

Consultee Organization	Level of Support for Vision & Objectives	Level of Support for Themes and Actions	Summary of Comments
Age UK Berkshire	Agree	Agree	Resurfacing of key routes is urgent. More wheelchair and other disability access is also required. Improved

			<p>signs are also important as not everyone has the internet.</p> <p>Some cyclists are not careful when it comes to giving walkers space especially for the old older generation who find it difficult to get out of the way of inconsiderate cyclists. I therefore do not agree with the idea of reducing physical barriers for cycling on footpaths as these help to keep cyclists more alert and not cycling at a dangerous speed for walkers.</p>
British Horse Society	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	<p>A well-presented and well researched plan. Congratulations. The Society thanks Reading Borough Council for talking equestrian needs seriously even though Reading is an urban area.</p> <p>One or two of the bridleways (eg Hemdean Bottom) are vital for those residents who keep their horse on the urban fringe but may live in Reading.</p>
CPRE Berkshire	Strongly Agree	Agree & Strongly Agree	<p>Would be helpful to add that integration with neighbouring areas is also an aim. It will be helpful to facilitate access to neighbouring walking & cycling networks to open up the options for wider access for Reading residents.</p>
Mid & West Berkshire Local Access forum	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	<p>Reading Borough Council is to be congratulated on a thoroughly researched piece of work which is well and clearly presented. This is an example to be followed by others (though we recognise that a Local Authority with a larger PROW can probably not consider individual PROW in its ROWIP).</p> <p>The Forum appreciates reference to its views and contributions, thus making its efforts worthwhile.</p> <p>The Forum welcomes the detail in 'Table E2: The List of suggested additions to the Public Rights of Way' as this spells out how the Reading PROW network might actually be improved.</p>
Pang Valley Pambler Group of the Ramblers' Association	Agree	Agree	<p>We have concerns regarding the Thames Path. The existing path is insufficiently wide to segregate pedestrians and cyclists and to comply with National Advice 3m recommended width for combined Footpath/cycle track nor in places the minimum 2m width of Reading Borough Council.</p>

Reading Buses	Agree	Agree	N/A
Reading Cycle Campaign	Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	“Enhancing the public rights of way network and linking it with the walking and cycling network would significantly improve opportunities for non-car travel across the Borough. As well as providing for leisure and health, this would also encourage utility and commuter journeys. It is significant that almost half of existing rights of way users are cyclists. Enhancing the network would make journeys safer, easier, more pleasant and enjoyable, which would encourage non car-based travel.
Thames Valley Police	Agree	Agree & Strongly Agree	Clear and consistent with current thinking. Reading appears not to include all forms of alternate travel and I would encourage the use of scooters which have improved travel options in our areas.

4.13 The engagement and feedback received from statutory stakeholders has been an important element to the development of the strategy, both through individual sessions and responses provided on the draft plan through both the initial and statutory consultations.

4.14 Following the consultation of the statutory consultation, a number of updates have been made to the ROWIP to capture additional feedback received as well as providing further details on the responsibilities of the Council. The main updates include:

- Addition of a responsibilities section to summarise the various responsibilities held by different departments and organisations in relation to the Rights of Way network in the borough.
- Addition of a funding section to highlight potential sources of funding for the actions included within the strategy document. Although it should be noted that these may change in the future.
- Minor additions and amendments made throughout the document to add clarity in response to various helpful comments received through the statutory consultation.

4.15 The ROWIP and its appendices are a live document and some further updates or amendments may be required in the future. Any minor amendments will be agreed with the Assistant Director of Planning, Transport and Public Protection, as well as with the associated Lead Councillors. If any major amendments are proposed, an updated version of the ROWIP would be reported back to this Committee for approval. The latest version of the full set of documentation that makes up the RoWIP strategy (including appendices) will remain available on the Council’s website here - <https://www.reading.gov.uk/vehicles-roads-and-transport/transport-strategy/rights-of-way-improvement-plan/>

4.16 In conclusion, the RoWIP is a wide-ranging plan covering all aspects of the management, maintenance and improvement of the Public Rights of Way network in Reading. Feedback received through both the initial and statutory consultations provide strong support for the strategy, therefore it is recommended that the final version of the RoWIP for the period 2023-33 is adopted by the Council.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 The future delivery of schemes contained within the RoWIP will help to deliver the following priorities in the Council's Corporate Plan:

- Healthy Environment
- Thriving Communities
- Inclusive Economy

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Transport is the biggest greenhouse gas emitting sector in the UK accounting for around 27% of total carbon emissions. As set out in the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25, this figure is lower in Reading with transport accounting for around 20% of carbon emissions. However, significant investment in sustainable transport solutions is vital in order to respond to the Climate Emergency declared by the Council in February 2019 and to help achieve our target of a carbon neutral Reading by 2030.

6.2 The Climate Impact Assessment tool has been used to assess the proposal as set out within this report, resulting in an overall Net Medium Positive impact. This is due to the RoWIP being focused on encouraging the use of sustainable transport, walking and cycling as attractive alternatives to the private car. The object of the plan is for the network to be open to the public, safe, clean, well maintained and in good condition. This will encourage people to use it alongside the rest of the walking and cycling network in Reading, with resultant health benefits for the public.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

7.1 As set out within the report, a 12 week statutory consultation took place over the winter from 23 November 2022 to 19th February 2023 and feedback has been incorporated into an update version of the strategy.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, a public authority must have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act,
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it, and
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

8.2 The Council, and where appropriate partner delivery organisations, will undertake an equality impact assessment scoping exercise on the projects included within the draft RoWIP at the appropriate stage of development.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 By preparing the RoWIP the Council is fulfilling its statutory duty to prepare and keep updated a Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan, under Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

9.2 In addition, the Council has duties under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Highways Act 1980 to maintain and keep the Definitive Map and Statement of Public Rights of Way updated, and to ensure that rights of way in the borough are adequately signposted, maintained and free from obstruction.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Preparation of the RoWIP has been undertaken through the use of existing Council budgets. Delivery of the schemes and initiatives as set out within the plan are all subject to securing suitable levels of future funding.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 None